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Jørgensen, Helle Hovgaard

*Published in:*

The Digital Literacy and Multimodal Practices of Young Children: Engaging with Emergent Research

*Publication date:*

2016

*Document version*

Final published version

*Citation for pulished version (APA):*

Jørgensen, H. H. (2016). Children's play with digital media in a Danish pre-primary school: Media literacy between a play cultural child perspective and a school-cultural adult perspective . In I. Pereira, A. Ramos, & J. Marsh (Eds.), The Digital Literacy and Multimodal Practices of Young Children: Engaging with Emergent Research: Proceedings of the first Training School of COST Action IS1410 (Chapter Paper 9, pp. 82-89). DigiLitEY.

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# Children's play with digital media in a Danish pre-primary school: Media literacy between a play-cultural child perspective and a school-cultural adult perspective

Helle Hovgaard Jørgensen<sup>1</sup>

Syddansk Universitet & University College Lillebælt, Odense, Denmark

## Abstract

Danish schools are obliged to work 'in a playful way' with digital media according to the demands in the descriptions of the curricula for pre-primary education (Undervisningsministeriet, 2015). Much money has been spent on digital infrastructure, but still professionals in pre-primary education say that they are short of time, experience and knowledge when it comes to actual implementation of new media in everyday school life. On the other hand, most children come from media-rich homes. This article addresses the gap between in and out of school from a child's perspective. The key concepts are play and media literacy, and the project's take on play is inspired by the paradigmatic change towards a participatory and child-oriented scientific position. The understanding of media literacy is narrowed down to a trichotomy that implies having access to media, understanding media and creating/

expressing oneself using media. A qualitative study within the sociocultural scientific field was carried out in order to gain a fuller understanding of a child's perspective of media literacy.

**Keywords:** Play, media literacy, participation, Spielraum, pre-primary education

## Introduction

As I began my fieldwork February 2014, the professionals made it clear that technology, digital media and the like did not have first priority. On the other hand, pre-primary children from media-rich homes know about the 'Net', YouTube and Skype, use different devices, mainly for gaming, and are aware of specific apps, films and television. Recent research supports my findings (Chaudron, 2015; Johansen &

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<sup>1</sup> hhj@sdu.dk

Larsen, 2016). Certainly, children do have some skills, knowledge and know-how concerning digital media when they enter school. In other words, I have noticed a (digital) gap between 'in and out of school' that corresponds to a gap that is also theoretically addressed (Drotner & Erstad, 2012; Erstad & Amdam, 2013; Gee, 2010; Sefton-Green, 2012). The possible connections between children's play culture and media literacy need therefore to be investigated in order to rethink the pre-primary school setting. Much research and policymaking that deal with media literacy have focused on parents and professionals (Buckingham, 2003; Jenkins, 2009; Livingstone, 2009). We need to gain a fuller understanding of a perspective whereby children's play culture is investigated in order to make that perspective work in media education.

The central question of the article is: How can knowledge about children's play with digital media inform our understanding of media literacy and be part of a school's formal work with media literacy?

### **Theoretical framework**

Play and media literacy are key concepts in my investigation. The project's take on play is inspired by the paradigmatic change towards a participatory and child-oriented scientific position. Play depends on participation (being in, being part of), activity (doing something) and skills (know-how), according to play studies (Karoff,

2013; Mouritsen, 1996; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Speaking of play in a school context it is very often understood as 'play as progress' or 'play as learning' rhetoric (Sutton-Smith, 1997). If looked upon from a child's perspective, children do not play in order to learn (or educate/ develop) themselves, but they might need to learn something in order to master a special part of play (Mouritsen, 1996). Moreover, play is a framed activity that differs from 'not play' (Bateson, 1972).

There is a variety of understandings and definitions of media literacy (Erstad & Amdam, 2013), but it is often narrowed down to a trichotomy that implies having access to media, understanding media and creating/ expressing oneself using media (Carlsson, 2013; Erstad & Amdam, 2013; UNESCO, 2013). In order to find out how children's cultural play 'doings' and 'know-how' can inform media literacy, I have looked into three levels of both play and media literacy. Important dimensions are therefore: access, understanding and create/ express, but also participation, activity/ performance and skills. Access to media must be a precondition for participating in play with media. At the same time, children do something with media (act, perform, create, communicate) and demonstrate some skills while playing with media (understanding, levels of reflection). Though it seems that the understandings of media literacy and of play correspond, there is a need for further investigation.

## Methodological framing

This article is based on long-term fieldwork among children in two different schools. The children were all part of pre-primary education (5–6 years old). Approximately 120 children were involved, and a qualitative study was conducted by using participatory methods including fieldwork, participatory observations, interviews and interventions (Andrew Burn, 2014; Clark, Flewitt, Hammersley & Robb, 2014; Gulløv & Højlund, 2006; Marsh, 2012).

Practice theory frames the paper (Couldry, 2004; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2001; Swidler, 2001), because the main focus is directed towards what children do when using digital media in various ways while being engaged in playful activities. It includes both discursive and interactive practices in play. The analytic strategies are based on grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014; Guvå & Hyllander, 2003).

## Analysis and results

Grounded on my initial fieldwork's interest in 'what's going on' in school vis-à-vis children and digital media, I found that three defining levels of media literacy were addressed by practitioners. The access level was practised as regulation, and the youngest children most often had no access to digital media. The level of understanding was expressed as a concern, whether young children were able to 'see through the media'. Levels of

creating and expressing were vaguely present. Since my issue concerns what is going on when children play with digital media in pre-primary classes, I have focused on the playful 'interaction, creative and communicative' dimension of media literacy, and with children as central informants.

I want to demonstrate children's 'playful approach' to digital media with two interviews: One about the game Hayday (one of twenty 'short' interviews about 'digital media: two children outside during a break), another about inventing a game (one of three final 'in-depth' interviews: two children in a classroom).

The examples are situated as interviews, given how I ask some questions the children are supposed to answer. But, as we shall see, the interviews are indeed 'active' in the sense that all participants in them (and others) are implicated in meaning-making (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The interviews are semi-structured, but at the same time spontaneous. The situation hinges on the interaction between interview participants, and it processes and produces narratives structured by both experience and artfulness (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 18). It is framed as an interview, but artfulness, spontaneity and interaction reframe it as a playful event for children. Artfulness is interesting because it conveys or mediates children's media literacy in a way that involves play. Play is "fundamentally dependent on the children's participation and activity and is predicated

on their acquisition of skills in terms of expressive forms, aesthetic techniques, forms of organization, *mise en scène* and performance” (Mouritsen, 2002, p. 23). In other words, the interview creates room for play (*Spielraum*) and tells us something about children’s media literacy. Both interview and play are situational and organized as social communities of cooperation by participants. The interview is framed by an adult researcher. In a grounded approach, the first and most important question is: ‘What’s going on?’. This is not play, and it is play. It is not an interview, and it is an interview. There is a double framing to take into consideration when analyzing the data. I will leave the methodological frame for a while and continue within the theoretical frame of play and media literacy.

### **A play analysis of a framed activity, interview about Hayday**

The interview is conducted outside, during a break. Other children come and go and gather around the interview situation. Many comments are given from ‘outside’ children. The two interviewed girls have just told me they play Hayday on iPads. They say it is important to feed the animals:

Ego: *What happens if you don’t?*

Girl: *Then ermm... (a boy interrupts)*

Boy: *Me and N has tried not to feed an animal, then it died! (shouts)*

Ego: *Oh, what kind of game was that?*

B: *It was the world’s greatest animal.*

*(speaks slower and changes his voice)*

Ego: *Was it also in Hayday?*

Boy: *It was a rhino. (the intonation is dramatic)*

(03.43–4.05)

The two girls have agreed on their roles as informants. The situation is a framed activity (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974). The positions are clear, I am the adult who is in charge of the situation, and they are children. Moreover, we have implicitly agreed on our roles in this specific situation. I ask the questions and they answer them (Goffman, 1959). We present ourselves, respectively, as interviewer and informants.

But then the boy breaks into a framed activity, a well-established interview. In order to succeed, and to become part of the situation, he needs to reframe it. He uses two basic principles of play, a formula (implicitly he makes it clear: this is play) and improvisation (make-believe, *mise en scène*, performance) (Mouritsen, 2002). He changes his voice to a dramatic intonation, speaks nonsense (there has never been a Rhino in Hayday, and the animals cannot die) and uses the symbolic and metaphorical power of language in order to convince the listener to listen to his story, and implicitly he reflects on the fact that ‘this is play’. He uses the rhetoric of exaggeration, and ‘the world’s greatest animal’ is suddenly the main figure in Hayday. We are convinced; he takes over the scene, and sets a new order. The dramatic and situational character of the interruption works to subvert the order of

both the interview and the game. He knows the code of play, and since he is familiar with the game he knows how to improvise in order to become a participant of the interview situation, so he reframes it as play. He has play skills in terms of expressions, aesthetic techniques, how to perform and set the scene (Mouritsen, 2002).

The instant he 'enters', he crosses a threshold between in and out of the framed activity. Moreover, he subverts the order by turning the normativeness of Hayday upside down. Hayday is about keeping the animals alive, but he declares their death! He knows the formula of the game, and therefore he is able to transgress the formula of a beloved 'construction game' and turn it into a 'destruction game', and his skills are acknowledged/ applauded by the girls' giggling. Because of his game knowledge and his knowledge of the game's mechanics, he plays with norms and rules. He knows right from wrong and understands the morals of the game. He demonstrates that by parodying Hayday. His shift of intonation, use of nonsense and conscious change of animal categories signify levels of reflexivity and an ability to activate the play formula and improvise. His aesthetic skills (subverting language) evoke the Bakhtinian chronotope, the threshold (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 248). Time and place are important in the framing of the situation. It happens in a moment, time is here and now. Place is the schoolyard, on the stairs to the building with the classrooms, a physical threshold between

in and out; and mentally the children are 'out' of school for a moment. The chronotope evokes both centripetal and centrifugal forces. All kinds of language and text are potentially involved in the dynamics of play culture, including media texts, of course, if they are useful. They are set in motion in activities, remixed and transformed for the purpose of play.

In other words, play is the main thing, it embeds digital media culture both as references and as possibilities for enriching interactions. The boy is well aware of the framed interview activity, and he knows what it takes to reframe it. The interview is artfully interrupted, and the interviewer's role is subverted and replaced by the 'world's greatest animal'. It takes some force to replace adult power, but aesthetic techniques and implicit knowledge-sharing do the trick.

But what has this to do with media literacy? First, the level of understanding media seems quite advanced here. The boy uses his knowledge of the game Hayday to demonstrate the Batesonian meta-communicative paradox of play: this is about both animals dying and animals not dying. The theme of the 'play' (the lustful: 'then it died') differs 'from the practice' of the play which is to participate, keep it going, have fun, impress the audience, perform, create new games, experiment etc. Second, no moral panic is needed. He understands the levels of representation in both play and the game. Third, he obviously brings his play culture to school. His



reservoir of knowledge, skills and actions is part of his practice in school as well as out of school.

In the other interview example, one of the questions was meant to inform the creating/ expressing dimension of media literacy: "What if you were supposed to invent a game, what would it be like, if it should be really good, in your opinion?" The question was not answered by talking about it, but by showing/ acting out 'the game'.

One girl (A) was interviewed together with a boy (J). When I asked a question she immediately set up a scene with two chairs and a table and initiated the artful plot of a game she called 'Restaurant'. The boy (J) seated himself without being asked to do so. The set-up implicitly invited J to play the part of guest in the 'game'. A's action, the set-up of the chairs and a table, was followed by Jonas's reaction. A social community of co-operation (and communication) was established. Through chains of associations, A moved in and out of two dimensions, inventing the game and playing the game, and J co-operated and co-created.

The collective aspect of the communication was obvious. The children needed to co-operate with and without words in order to keep the 'game' going. They demonstrated a solid understanding of 'the game' by referring to levels, rewards, actions, conflicts, monsters and killing. Moreover, narrative aesthetic techniques were

demonstrated, scenes set and performed. In this Spielraum, digital and physical rooms intervened and new ideas, modes, sounds and words came up. It was both an experimenting room and a room for innovation.

Results: What then is the gap about?

It seems that there is no gap between media literacy practices and play practices in an approach constructed from a child's perspective. One practice is embedded in the other, and it seems learning is acted out.

My empirical data point to the importance of looking into contexts of play, self-expression and communication in order to understand the engagement of 'media practices' among children in pre-primary education. Moreover, the data suggest quite advanced skills, knowledge and know-how, and complex levels of reflexivity that are exchanged in 'knowledge-sharing communities' and involve both play and learning (Jenkins, 2006). Creating 'Spielraum' (Ackerberg, 2013) seems to be important, and there is a double understanding of the word. It is literally understood as room for play, both physically and temporally in school, and metaphorically as elbow room or room for manoeuvre, in order to mentally create room for playful ways with digital media. The concept of 'Spielraum' needs to be elaborated as a key to transformation, remixing, co-operation, co-creation, innovation etc.

Both empirical examples demonstrate levels of spontaneous creativity and innovation, but also levels of ‘understanding media’, room for meaning-making and learning, and the potential for developing competencies.

Media literacy is already embedded in children’s digital play practices. In other words, media literacy is ‘out of school’ as a part of children’s non-formal play practices. But it does not seem as if children’s digital play practices are embedded in a schooled understanding of media literacy. How to embed play in a more formal understanding of media literacy involves more knowledge about what ‘playful’ means from the perspective of children.

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